

RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM: A CHALLENGE OF NATION BUILDING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria since independence has been characterized by various forms of crises, including civil unrest, civil war, ethnic rivalries, militancy, intra-ethnic conflicts, and other forms of social instability. Among these, religious crises arising from religious fundamentalism have had particularly devastating consequences. Religious fundamentalism has continued to threaten the peace, security, and stability of the Nigerian state, as well as the orderly conduct of both public and private affairs. Beyond instigating violent conflicts, the activities of religious fundamentalists influence social relations, shape political support and voting patterns during elections, and affect the distribution of resources and opportunities within society. This paper therefore examines how religious fundamentalism has posed a significant challenge to nation-building in Nigeria. The study adopts a qualitative approach based on secondary sources of data, including journal articles, textbooks, and internet materials, to support its analysis. The findings are presented thematically, with issues discussed under relevant sub-themes. The study reveals that the recurring religious crises arising from fundamentalism have not only retarded national development but have also made the pursuit of nation-building a herculean task. Consequently, the study offers recommendations for addressing these challenges and promoting sustainable peace and national integration.

Keyword: Challenge, Fundamentalism, Nation-Building, Religion.

Introduction

From the very start of nationhood, Nigeria has faced not only ethnicity but also religious divisions. Just like a norm now, this division has been played up, manipulated and mobilized for both socio-economic and political gains. This has bred distrust, manipulations, suspicions, engendering sectionalism and climaxing into conflicts that have witnessed the destructions of lives, properties and even the waste of national treasures and resources, which have in turn undermined the process of nation building. Thus, the highest societal matters arising today are religious-inclined, while others such as linguistic, political, socio-cultural and economic follow. Such development underscores qualifications, competence, capacity, transparency and technical know-how. It also undermines the place of reward, encouragement and motivation to deserving citizens. The overall effect of such practices is the negative impact it has made in nation building. This study therefore examines how all of these ills have challenged the several efforts aimed at nation building. The study is presented in eighth themes, which include the concept of religion fundamentalism, nation building, interplay between religion and politics, and the effect of religious crises among others. The study reveals that religious fundamentalism has challenged nation building in Nigeria.

The Concept of Religion

The concept 'religion' is a very difficult one, as efforts to define religion suffers parochialism among plethora of writers. Simply put, Religion is a belief system of a superhuman being controlling mortals or man. It is perceived to be a system of a suzerainty relationship between a Supreme Being (God) and man, involving in worship faith and trust from the later to the former. It is when man, mortal looks up for help, from an immortal (God) Odey, (2017). To this end, Onoguere notes, that it is obvious that the concept 'religion' can be Interpreted as a concrete relationship existing between two different persons, e.g- a man and a superior BEING, like spirit, gods/God. Moreover, there are promises (oath) both parties are to abide to in order to concretize the relationship. Jacob (1977), cited in Lawal (2003), in his own view, describes religion to vision and revelation of the underlying wonders of a superior being, like God to man. This is an expression of man's total submission to a supreme being, God (gods), as an inferior, in reward for the perceived wonders of the superior being. The classical definition offered by William (1902) has it as "the feelings, act and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine.

The Concept of Religious Fundamentalism

Religious fundamentalism has become a prominent phenomenon in international politics today. "Religious fundamentalism has significantly shaped world history and continues to influence individual attitudes and behaviors. It represents a distinctive attitude of certainty as to the ultimate truth of one's religious beliefs. The word "fundamentalism" dates to an early 20th century American religious movement. The movement took its name from a

companion of twelve volumes published between 1960 and 1965 by a group of Protestant layman entitled, *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of the Truth*. It owes its existence, according to Torey, (2013), particularly to the same evangelical awakening of the early 19th century and a variety of millennium movements. It came to embody both principles of absolute religious orthodoxy and Evangelical practices which called for believers to extend action beyond religion into political and social life. Religious fundamentalists believe that religious doctrines or propositions are absolute and immutable. They find change oppressive and troubling. Religious fundamentalism in the eyes of a common man is absolutism in the practice of one's religion.

This definition is core to knowing what religious fundamentalism is globally. In the context of this work, religious fundamentalism is the manipulation of a people on the premise of their religious inclination to achieve political, social and economy goal. In Nigeria, religion has played into the hands of our desperate politicians, religious capitalists and religious separatists. They have manipulated religion to achieve their selfish gain, thereby influencing their desires or efforts in the choice and appointment of credible candidates into various strata of the nation's leadership, hence, affecting the possibility of building a strong nation.

"Religiosity" without religion is a great challenge to nation-building in a seeming religious nation like Nigeria. Nigeria as a religious nation is rather plagued with religious woes, not just against God almighty but humanity too, than the then Egyptians and Sodom/Gomorrah's. The Paradox is that a nation of religiosity without religion is bound to be distressed by religion. The three major religions in Nigeria include; African Traditional Religion (A.T.R), Christianity and Islam. There is no doubt that events over the years have shown that the adherents of these religions have rather see themselves as sworn enemies, especially the Christians and Muslims. The ill of such rivalries is that such animosity have crept into the socio-cultural lives of the populace and worse of is that politics which is a major instrument of any nation's development, has now been balkanized along religion.

Nation Building

According to Meredith McQuire, cited in Aguwa, (1997), nation building refers to developing a country's sense of solidarity and identity as a people". Today, it is almost becoming a difficult trip to embark upon nation building, efforts to achieve this has been replete with several challenges, such as corruptions, lack of accountability, poverty, neo-colonialism that has led to dependency syndrome and principally the focus of this discourse, which is religious fundamentalism. The history of African countries has been saddled with narratives of the difficult task of building their nations, primarily because of the arbitrary determination of boundaries of African States by the colonial administrations for their convenience in the exploitation and exploration of the African soil. This arbitrary determination of boundaries forcibly included within a nation-state, the diversities of "tribes, tongues and beliefs". This should have been a plus if a positive mindset had welcomed the belief that diversity of the people's background could be properly harnessed to build a united front in their pursuit of progress and development, the reactions to supposed unity in diversity has however, been negative one, hence, the situation had provoked the reaffirmation of ethnic and religious differences. Hence, most of the people of the nations that were forcefully married into one country/nation retain perceptions of their identity with great difficulty transcending ethnic, regional and religious boundaries.

Religion and the Nigerian Nation

Nigeria is one of the world most religious countries across the world, with individuals proclaiming and holding fast to a profession of one faith or the other. As earlier observed, religion in Nigeria is diverse, with three most pronounced religions; African Traditional Religion (A.T.R), Christianity and Islam. While the ATR has not been obvious in the eyes of the storm, Christianity and Islam conflicts with each other has characterized the reputation of the country shortly after independence, often involving the destructions of properties, bloodshed for superiority, population increase, popularity, secularism, political relevance and rights. The interacting inputs of Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion have often been studied in isolation and understood merely in terms of mutual competition. Christians note the triumphal progress of Islam. Muslims oppose the growth of Christian ways of life. African Traditional Religionists see in Islam and Christianity the seeds of a nation divided. "This relationship between A.T.R, Islam and Christianity has been a relationship of suspicion and distrust, intolerance and verbal-clashes and physical, rivalries and uncompromising attitudes. The escalations of religious crisis in most Nigerian cities have constituted a problem in recent times that the seemingly unity Nigeria enjoys in continually being threatened, which makes it doubtful to achieve nation building. It is even alleged in some quarters that these are a result of manipulations which unscrupulous politicians, civil or military, use as smoke-screens to divert attention from more serious problems of the country and their own personal inadequacies and corruption (Mbiti, 1969).

In Africa the relationship between religion and politics has been given various interpretations. In fact, Mbiti (1969), suggests a politicization of religion in the body polity of the state. He relied heavily on the opinion of Metuh (1996), which suggests that "religious fanaticism and favouritism have also been politically employed to polarize the people and sustain unhealthy tension of Africa. This situation points directly to the fact that religion has negatively affected

politics. However, it should be noted that politics has equally affected religious thoughts, practices and beliefs in the country. These two major religions, shortly after independence have been manipulated by politicians as an instrument of politics. This political manipulation has given Nigerians more reasons to worry about and such development has further divided the populace, destroyed the fragile peace inherited from the imperialist. The resultant effect is that it has weakened the leadership recruitment process into positions of authority, either through democratic process or in the appointment of persons to man the affairs of governance, as religious consideration has become a primary requirement for the consideration of such appointments.

The Interplay of Religion and Politics in Nigeria

Religious politics occupy the center stage in Nigerian society. Before independence in Nigeria, religion and political authorities were inter-independent. Religion and politics were inseparable and the only religion in Nigeria was African traditional religion (Kukah, 1994). But before independence, the advent of Islam and Christianity has intensified sudden changes that resulted into religious politics, with ethnics' crisis and bigotry. The growing sensitivity to the differing needs of various groups and disposition to accommodate these needs, have led the government to reaffirm the pluralistic nature of the state and the constitution guaranteeing religious freedom of worship in Nigeria. Essentially, the state declares her neutrality in religious affairs, respecting the separation of religion and state, but paradoxically there appears to be a significant distinction between the ideal of government acceptance of the religiously plural nature of the Federation and the actual implementation of the constitutional guarantees.

The halting dialectic of religious politics in the last decades has led to significant consequences for relation between religion and politics. The increasing state of religious conflicts in the country as a result of government involvement in and regulation of religious affairs has affected the nation positively and negatively. Religion which has been a cohesive force in many societies has proved extremely divisive and dis-interrogatives in Nigeria. In their search for national unity, Nigerians have fallen back on prejudice, bigotry and parochial antagonism that only promote chaos and anarchy. Thus, taking undue advantage of the situation, some politicians who are sadists have so permeated all the fabrics of national life with the religious sentiment that now forms the basis of political cleavages, placement on the key posts in government service, and award of contracts and disbursement of economic benefits. This attitude has dampened people's sense of patriotism and commitment that no ordinary Nigeria is ready to die for this country. The level at which religion is being manipulated in the religious and political circles by politicians have greater impacts on the nation than excellence or competence that would determine their rewards. Historical studies of pre-Islamic and Christian era have also indicated that before both religions took roots in what constitute Nigeria, religious politics at that time was not pronounced. Politics was regarded as communitarian affairs which involved the whole members of the society. The traditional religious politics was accepted as the ideal virtue until foreign religions infiltrated the Nigerian nation. Since that time, Nigeria has experienced various crises and riots which are threatening her corporate existence. Each of these conflicts has had devastating effects on the unity, peace and tranquility of Nigeria as a nation.

As opine by Bryan (1969), one of the most disturbing issues in the unification of Nigeria is religious politics. The close interaction between Nigeria state and religious based organization reflects the widespread perception that Nigeria is not a secular state. The existence of several religions in Nigeria accentuates regional and ethnic distinctions. This complex and unhealthy relationship create more rooms for national tension, tribalism and religious sentiment between Muslims and Christians adherents in Nigeria. Ngele noted that amalgamation invoked by Nigerians as the foundation of the rancorous relationship between the two religions (North and South) prepare grounds for political disagreements and suspicious between Muslims and Christians. Each of the two regions contains ethnic and religious minorities who harbor grievances against ethnic and religious majorities they see as hegemonic oppressors. These grievances are sometimes expressed through bitter political complaints, sectarian crises stoked by political elites and incendiary media rhetoric, and violent insurgencies.

Mckee (1981), posited that the jarring effects of arbitrary colonial unification of the northern and southern regions was so deep that one Northern Nigerian Muslim nationalist leader declared Nigeria the mistake of 1914, while a prominent Southern Nigerian Christian nationalist figure called Nigeria a mere geographic expression. The Christian anxieties about Muslim domination of the national political space and the accompanying fear that politically dominant Muslims would use their privileged perch to Islamize national institutions and impose Islamic Sharia law on non-Muslims have impoverished and denied Muslims, especially those from Northern Nigeria opportunities to leadership positions. This situation made most of the political development in Nigeria during colonial period to hold bold stamp on Christian political factor.

The Muslim politicians later came on the scene in post-independent period when manipulation of religion and monetization of politics have become the order of the day. This speedy unfolding of political events in rather unpredictable manner in Nigeria made Chief Anthony Enahoro, who watched sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa

collected the constitutional intentment to lament thus:

...the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 by the British colonizers was a great mistake for the rest of the country, for Dr. Azikiwe should have been there, chief Awolowo should have been there, but they were spectators.

Enahoro's lamentation points to the fact that religion has been employed by politicians in contemporary Nigeria in particular, and Africa in general for political benefits. It started from religious affiliation and degenerated into ethnicity and finally wore a coat of religiousization in the pioneer parties such as Northern People's Congress (NPC), Action Group (AG) and National Council of Nigeria and Cameroun (NCNC), among others. In the campaign of both parties, religious politics was employed for winning people. Thus, the NPC supporters were considered as Islamic members because the party leaders were Muslims. They distributed clothes, beads, books and Sallaya to traditional and Christian worshippers to win their votes. While Christians who opted for AG and NCNC were in most parts of Nigeria arrested and imprisoned. The same campaign strategy was used in 1978 by the party leaders of National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). Falola explains that it was the year that Sheikh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi in a nation broadcast implored Muslims not to vote a non-Muslim into power. That announcement made religious politics in Nigeria to take a new dimension from 1977 to date. Since then, religious politics has become a tool for manipulation, violence and disasters of all forms. Religious politics in post-colonial period is dominated by Muslim politicians as earlier stated and it is often characterized with intolerance, riots, violence, destruction of lives and properties (arson), thuggery, sycophancy and molestation of innocent citizens. For example, in the Southern and Western parts of Nigeria, the problem has been between the Christian communities and the indigenous African religious worshippers. While in Northern Nigeria, the situation has been open and destructive confrontations between the Christians and the Muslims. The list of crises witnessed in Nigeria (with specific reference to Northern Nigeria), since 1980 includes the following:

The Kasuar Magahi conflict, Kaduna state, in 1980

The Maitatsine uprising, Kano city, in December, 1980

The Maitatsine uprising of Kano, Kaduna, and Maiduguri in October, 1982

The Maitatsine uprising, of Yoda, February, 1984

The Masitatsine uprising, Gombe, April, 1985.

The conflict in Kafanchan, Kaduna, Zaria and other parts of Kaduna state in March, 1987.

The conflict in Tafawa Balewa and other parts of Bauchi state in 1991, and 2000-2001

The conflict in Zing Kayla and other parts of Kaduna state in February and May, 1992

The conflict in Kano state in 1999-2000

Kano Anti-American war in Afghanistan Riots, September-October, 2001

The conflict in Jos metropolis and environs in 2001-2002 and 2010

The conflict on the Mambila Plateau in 2001-2002

The conflict in Gamut, Kaduna state, in 2001

The Anti-miss world conflict in Kaduna state, 2002-2003

The Jos crises of November, 2008-2010

The Boko Haram uprising in Maiduguri and Bauchi, 2009

These various crises and riots are indications of the extent to which the various religious bodies have reached in lack of mutual respect, trust and understanding for one another. Besides, they also show lack of respect for lives and property, including places of worship of the other. Not even the government could restore the loss of confidence, trust and credibility being suffered by the injured people (as the governments have most often been accused of fueling some of the crises). Both Christians and Muslims suspect whatever moves that is being made towards understanding and respect for one another.

Effect of Religious Fundamentalism on Nation Building

Right from her inception as a group brought together by the imperialist, Nigeria has been trying all it could to build a strong nation but this effort, often time has been set back by activities, and beliefs of these two chief religions. Here, efforts will be made to ascertain areas where religious fundamentalism has affected us negatively.

Destruction of Lives and Property: The Nigerian version of conflict is both tribal and religious. In Nigeria, there are different levels and forms of religious conflicts. These include intra and inter-religious conflicts. Intra-religious conflict often exists within a particular sect like Maitatsine riot of 1980 in Kano and Izala versus Tijjaniya brotherhood in Gombe in 1987. Although these crises were within sect, it led to the loss of lives and properties of people who were not from these sets, religion, tribes. The aftermath of this would generate bitterness amongst Nigerians and which would go as far as affecting our moves to forge ahead as a one nation. Statistics on religious crises across the country show that at least (95) ninety-five per cent of them occurred in the Northern parts of Nigeria and a microscopic few in other parts of the country.

Hence, the greatest harm of religious conflicts is that they leave in its wake magnanimous loss of lives. In Nigeria, violent religious crises, more especially between Christianity and Muslims have claimed thousands of lives and

property worth hundreds of millions. For examples: between 1980-1992, a total of (26) twenty-six religious riots was recorded and death toll put a 6,775, official figures. Likewise, between May 29- June 2, 1999, a violent religious clash in Warri, Delta State led to the loss of more than 200 lives. In Lagos State, and same year, Yoruba and Hausa traders classed in Ketu Market, resulting in the death of over 100 peoples.

In the same vein, violent religious conflicts have resulted to set back on infrastructure. Social infrastructure like schools, hospitals, health facilities/centers among others, are often times the target of destruction. In most cases, the tasks of rebuild destroyed property remain the daunting task of both the Federal and the State governments.

Economic Instability: It is important to note that religions crises does not only affect lives, but sources of livelihood, goods, etc. are being destroyed or carted away, leaving victims economically handicapped. Violent religious crises with their attendant effects also make both foreign and local investors to relocate their businesses to other peaceful areas that are safe haven for growth. In other to revamp the economic, former President, Olusegun Obasanjo, on assumption of office in 1999, made it the priority of his government to woo foreign investors into the nation's economy. His passionate appeal yielded little or no result. This is because the security of the investors and their investment could not be guaranteed. The apprehension of the international community was confirmed in 2000. Kaduna riots where foreigners in the state had to flee in their numbers. The Kaduna Chambers of Commerce and Industry in the same year canceled its trade fare as a result of religious tension. According to Tell Magazine, it is claimed that the trade Association lost about 600 million naira. Jos religious crises also witnessed exodus of businesses to neighboring states that are safe for their investments. Of course, this loss affected Nigerian investors from other ethnic groups whose investments are being destroyed. This has gone far to generate a mix feeling and questions about our oneness and fight to build a nation.

Political Effect: Nigeria, as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, requires peaceful co-existence to foster development and national security of the country, yet, this is not the lot of the country as it has continued to experience violent religious conflict tainted with *political under tone*, more especially between the Christians and Muslim in the country. Despite the fact that Nigeria is regarded as a secular state, the interference of religions in political affairs is second to none. Religion has continued to destabilize the peace of the nation. In 2011 general election, politicians in the north used politics to create crisis over President Goodluck Jonathan's victory. All that Goodluck did as president was not appreciated by a majority of the north. The Book Haram activities which were more intense during his administration were interpreted by Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Jonathan's political strategists and other Christian bodies as a plot by the northern politicians to bring Jonathan's administration down. In the same light, Christians all over Nigeria have been condemning the administration of being bias in its appointment of security chiefs and others from one region and particularly from the Muslim religion. Christian bodies, pastors and their followers have openly kicked and still kicking against the leadership of this current administration mostly from religious cum political stands with a claim that the administration is trying very hard to Islamized the country. This National political religious madness flows down from the national to state, local government, union/association of any kind (even in students' politics) within the country. Recently, Hon Abiodun Faleke who was the running mate to late Prince Abubakar Audu in the 2015 gubernatorial election under the platform of the All Progressive Congress (APC), blamed his denial of being sworn in as the governor after the demise of his principal on religious bias of the powers that be. To him, if he was to be a Muslim, he would have been allowed to inherit the votes of his principal by the political hegemony after the unfortunate incident

Social Implication: Religious fundamentalism has successfully bred suspicion and lack of mutual understanding because or since proper understanding between Christians and Muslims have not been effectively addressed, hence, it has often led to violent confrontations. As a result, some cities in Nigeria today, especially in the Northern parts have been split down the middle with Christians living in one part while Muslims live in the other. In Kaduna State for example, city is divided into two, Christians living in South of the river Kaduna and Muslims, living in the Northern part. Similarly, in Jos city, there are some areas where Muslims fear to settle. Nigerians seem to be more united or comfortable with people of the same faith than of the same ethnic group or from the same state. To a large extent, a Nigerian religious fundamentalist would prefer to render help to someone from his own religion than from his region. One's religion serves as qualification to "get what, when and how" with this extremist. Sometimes it's not only against opposite religion but within one religion. Within the Christians for instance, it's very difficult to secure a job in an establishment owned by a denomination different from where one worship.

Judging from the above, the gross display of intolerance by these religious fundamentalists leading to crises will always be a cog in the wheel of progress, national development and a conflict-free society until the adherents of Christianity and Islam imbibe the spirit of tolerance in conflict resolution.

Conclusion

The basic interest of this work is to examine how religious fundamentalism has affected nation building process in Nigeria. Nation building in a multi-ethnic society as Nigeria is never an easy task to carry as so many issues are factored. The study revealed that intolerance, political manipulation, ethnocentrism, among other factors, have been

disguised as religious fundamentalism, thereby hindering Nigeria's progress and undermining its pursuit of national development. The study also revealed that the political, economic and social manipulation of our two major religions (Christianity and Islam) have been one of the major reasons our country is struggling to attain nationhood. In addition, the study shows that political elites have weaponized poverty by manipulating religious extremists into engaging in unnecessary conflicts, resulting in the loss of lives, destruction of property, and the displacement of people. From the contents of the study, it is therefore recommended that government needs to separate religion from politics, leadership recruitment process should be based on competence rather than myopic reasons such as ethnic and religious considerations, and that the provisions of the constitution which presents Nigeria as a circular state should be upheld in its entirety. Furthermore, the constitution should be amended to proffer punishment for anyone found wanting in propagating fundamentalism capable of causing harm to others and creating division in the land.

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